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THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MALACHI.

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AFTER numerous interruptions the temple was finally completed the third of March, 516 B. C. Almost two generations have now passed since that event, brought about by the encouraging words of Haggai and Zechariah, and nearly a century since the great prophet of the exile gave comfort to those of his nation who longed again for the hills of Palestine. What has taken place during this period? What of Jerusalem? What of the condition of the returned exiles? Have the brilliant promises of the Deutero-Isaiah come to pass? Now that the temple has been built, has Yahweh returned to it in glory? Is Jerusalem once more overflowing with men and cattle, its streets filled with the laughter of children? Have the surrounding nations been shaken by the manifestations of Yahweh's power, have they been moved to acknowledge him as their God? What of Zerubbabel? Has he fulfilled the lofty hopes which his people entertained of him? These questions find an answer only in the silence of the period. Significant is the fact that there has been nothing to record except an abortive attempt to rebuild the walls of the city in the reign of Artaxerxes I. It is not until the time of the unknown prophet who calls himself Malachi that the full meaning of this silence is brought to light.

The phrase that best describes these sixty years is that of Professor G. A. Smith, who calls them "a time of disillusion, disheartening, and decay." In no respect did the new temple rival the magnificence and the splendor of the former one, and its completion had not yet ushered in the Messianic era. The population of Jerusalem, unincreased by further immigrations, continued to struggle along with droughts, bad crops, and insolent neighbors. Though crowned as the promised king of Israel, Zerubbabel had failed to make of himself more than a third-class

Persian satrap. The hand of the Persian tyrant was still over them, though they were of too little account for him to be overmuch oppressive. In the great struggle between the East and the West, between the Persian and the Greek, the Jews and their petty quarrels with the Samaritans and the other surrounding tribes were completely lost sight of. Bitter, indeed, must have been the national feeling, in the face of the glorious predictions of the Deutero-Isaiah, Haggai, and Zechariah, to see themselves utterly ignored in the maelstrom of militarism that surged around them. Returned to the homeland after the hardship of exile, hearts beating high with the visions of the new kingdom of God to be established, of the Holy City to be once more filled with the hum of trade, of the new temple to be again the symbol of Yahweh's residence among his people, and of that longed-for escape from the disgraceful thralldom of Yahweh's enemies,—and then to have not a single one of these expectations fulfilled, was almost overwhelming.

The result of all this was just what we should expect—distrust in God. And this distrust was the fundamental evil with which the author of Malachi had to deal. The exile had been a sore perplexity to the faithful Israelites. Fortunately there has been left to us a perfect picture of their mental suffering in the problem so skilfully presented in the experiences of Job. But the exile was now long passed, and, though returned to the fatherland, Yahweh had not yet redeemed his people from bondage. The greater part of the people had refused to be comforted by the noble solutions of the problem of suffering which had been worked out in the book of Job and in the Deutero-Isaiah. A large number had by this time given up in despair and had become defiant in their skepticism. On being assured of Yahweh's love they would retort bitterly: "Give us a proof of what you say."¹ The same querulous complaint that Job had made was theirs: "What good do we gain by being faithful to Yahweh? What is the use, after all, of our service, our prayer, our lamentation? It is the proud who are happy, and the wicked who are built up."² What do we get for it but kicks and insults? And *they*, they

¹ Mal. 1:2.

² Mal. 3:13-15.

are the very ones in whom God seems to delight. God, just? Impossible!"³ This lack of faith in God's love—perhaps not to be wondered at—was the root of all the immorality in their life. It was but natural that along with this growing skepticism, which later was to find its fullest development in Ecclesiastes, there arose an increasing insensibility to sin which showed itself in both priest and people alike.

The worship was, perhaps, the first to be affected. The services of the temple were kept up, but in a slovenly fashion. The priests did not scruple to offer in the sanctuary bread that was polluted and animals that were blind and blemished, such as they would not think of presenting to their own governor.⁴ In this they were imitated by the people, who accompanied their gifts by a sullen, contemptuous "sniffing" at their irksome task: "How utterly tired we are of the whole business!"⁵ The priests were partly, if not almost entirely, to blame for this condition of affairs. Lazy, corrupt and indifferent, they had neglected to instruct the people as to their duty. Very far short did they fall from the standard which the author of Malachi laid down: "The law of truth was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and uprightness, and did turn many away from iniquity. For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of Yahweh of hosts."⁶ Instead they turned many aside and caused them to stumble, so that the whole ceremonial service became contemptible.⁷

The civic life was no better. The prevailing oriental sins—adultery, perjury, oppression of the poor, perverting of justice—all were rife.⁸ National depression gave free rein to the baser instincts. No man was secure against the treachery of his fellows.⁹ Even the resident foreigner was completely at the mercy of the wealthy despot.¹⁰ An unknown writer describes the leaders of the people as follows: "His watchmen are blind, they are all without knowledge; they are all dumb dogs that cannot bark; dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. Yea,

³ Mal. 2: 17.⁵ Mal. 1: 12-14.⁷ Mal. 2: 9, 10.⁹ Mal. 2: 10.⁴ Mal. 1: 7, 8.⁶ Mal. 2: 6, 7.⁸ Mal. 3: 5.¹⁰ Mal. 3: 5.

the dogs are greedy, they can never have enough; and these are the shepherds that cannot understand: they have all turned to their own way, each one to his gain, one and all. 'Come ye,' they say, 'I will fetch wine, and we will fill ourselves with strong drink; and tomorrow shall be as this day, great beyond measure.'"¹¹ Later, Nehemiah condemned these very people for selling their own flesh and blood into slavery.¹²

Society was, indeed, in a bad way. Of peculiar danger to the new community was the tendency toward foreign alliances, a practice which later necessitated very severe measures on the part of both Ezra and Nehemiah. While considerations of peace and trade undoubtedly had some influence in this direction, together with the fact that among the returned company there were in all probability few women of marriageable age, the main motive for these alliances is evident. Many of the people of the land, Samaritans and the renegade Jews as well, had attained to positions of considerable affluence during the period of the exile. The leaders of the new community found no better way to strengthen their rather uncertain status than by marrying their sons to the daughters of such families. There was little religious scruple against such a course. Deuteronomy forbade marriage only with the Canaanites,¹³ and expressly permitted it with a maiden taken captive in war.¹⁴ Besides, Moses himself had married an Egyptian. With these precedents the temptation proved to be too strong to be overcome. Its unfortunate results are depicted in Mal. 2:10-16, where Yahweh's altar is covered "with tears, with weeping and with sighing" from the daughters of Israel ruthlessly put aside to make way for these new alliances. So great had the evil become that it called forth a condemnation of divorce almost as unequivocal as that of Christ himself: "And did he not make one, although he had the residue of the spirit? And wherefore one? He sought a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. *For I hate putting away.*"

This, then, is something of the situation that confronted the author of Malachi: a priesthood lazy and corrupt, neglecting to

¹¹ Isa. 56: 10-12.

¹² Neh. 5: 1-13.

¹³ Deut. 7: 2 ff.

¹⁴ Deut. 21: 10 ff.

instruct the people in religion, and offering imperfect sacrifices at the temple; many of the leaders, including doubtless the priests themselves, united in marriage to the wealthy people of the land, to accomplish which they had resorted to divorce; and the mass of the people so far sunk in despair that they had almost ceased to believe that God cared for them, or that they had any duty to perform toward him. We have been looking at the dark side of the picture. There is, however, happily a bright side, of which the existence of the book of Malachi is itself a proof. Nor was the author alone. He appears to have represented a class, a remnant of the people, who had not been engulfed by the popular pessimism. They were made of sterner fiber, and, notwithstanding hope so long deferred, still believed in Yahweh's love for Israel. Our author calls them "the righteous" (3:18) and "they who fear Yahweh" (3:16; 4:2). In the psalms of the period, similarly: "the poor," "the meek," "the needy," "the just," "the pious." Their lot was peculiarly hard, subjected as they were to the scorn and contempt of those, often neighbors and even kinsmen, to whose sullen and unbelieving hearts their simple piety and trust were especially aggravating. Pitiful are their cries to God:

Save me, O God ;
 For the waters are come in unto my soul.
 I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing :
 I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me.
 I am weary with my crying ; my throat is dried :
 Mine eyes fail while I wait for my God.
 Thou knowest my reproach, and my shame, and my dishonor :
 Mine adversaries are all before thee.
 Reproach hath broken my heart ; and I am full of heaviness :
 And I looked for some to take pity, but there was none ;
 And for comforters, but I found none.¹⁵

It is altogether probable that they met together for consolation and encouragement. "Then they that feared Yahweh spake often one with the other."¹⁶ The importance of such a little band of puritans in the midst of a godless nation ought not to be overlooked. They formed part of a golden thread which ran

¹⁵ Ps. 69 : 1-3, 19, 20. Cf. also Ps. 35.

¹⁶ Mal. 3 : 16.

throughout the course of Israel's history from the time of the 7,000 that did not bow the knee to Baal down to the time of those devout souls, "die Stillen im Lande," who continued to look for the redemption of Israel, out of which circle Jesus himself sprang and received his earliest impressions. They were the "remnant" of the prophets. As the representative of such a party, the author of Malachi raised his voice in protest against the evil tendencies of the time. It is not strange, knowing the contempt which the majority had for this mere handful of people who still clung in blind faith to their God, that he chose to remain *incognito*.

Of peculiar interest to us is the book of Malachi because it shows us prophecy in its last stages. Read the great prophets of the eighth to the sixth century—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—and then turn to Malachi and instantly "*morituri salutamus*" seems to echo in every sentence. The very form of discourse—statement, objection "but ye will say," and restatement—recalls the dialectic which soon became prevalent in the schools of the rabbis. The presence of the apocalyptic element,¹⁷ so characteristic of the last books to be added to the Old Testament canon, is itself a proof that prophecy can no longer cope with the problem of God's righteousness and a suffering nation. It plainly indicates that the hope of an adjustment of things in the present time has been given up. Thus a psalmist, writing at about this period, laments:

We see not our signs :
There is no more any prophet ;
Neither is there among us any that knoweth how long.
How long, O God, shall the adversary reproach ?
Shall the enemy blaspheme thy name forever ?¹⁸

The hope of a present adjustment of things once given up, the only consolation is in a future judgment where the righteous will finally triumph over the wicked. This idea, at first conceived of only with reference to the nation as a whole, with the growing individualism was finally applied to the problem of individual suffering, and thus in time gave birth to the later doctrine of immortality. The most striking indication that prophecy

¹⁷ Mal. 3:1-3, 17, 18; 4:5, 6.

¹⁸ Ps. 74:9, 10.

is on the wane, however, is found in the unique prediction of a messenger in the person of Elijah, whose duty will be to announce the approaching catastrophe. This is but a confession on the part of prophecy of her inability to inspire another great leader of the people. Her work has been accomplished. And so the writer turns back to the most representative man of the prophetic order, its founder and most conspicuous personality, Elijah, and finds in him the one best fitted to make a last appeal for the conversion of the nation "before the great and terrible day of Yahweh come."

One rather remarkable statement must not be passed by without notice. "From the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name is great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense is offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name is great among the Gentiles, saith Yahweh of hosts."¹⁹ It is all the more remarkable because of the author's general attitude toward foreign nations, as seen in the hatred expressed against the Edomites,²⁰ and in the drastic treatment of the foreign marriages. This exclusiveness seems to make impossible the interpretation given by Kuenen and others, viz.: "the true God is worshiped by the nations, however ignorantly, whom the Jews regarded as unclean." We are rather to find here a recognition of the singularly pure monotheism of the Persians, which could not fail to have impressed itself upon the Jews.

There remains to be discussed the prophet's attitude toward the law. As we have said, the book shows us prophecy in its final decline. Nevertheless, it does not fail to lay the same emphasis that the older prophets did upon the love, the holiness, and the righteousness of Yahweh. Moreover, the message that had ever been spoken to backsliding Israel by the former messengers of God is here repeated: "Return unto me and I will return unto you."²¹ To the author of Malachi, however, the return was to be accomplished only in one way, viz., by the fulfilment of the ritual. "Remember ye the law of Moses, my servant."²² Not until they had brought the whole tithe into the storehouse

¹⁹ Mal. 1:11.²⁰ Mal. 1:2-5.²¹ Mal. 3:7.²² Mal. 4:4.

and had completed the requirements of the law, could they expect to receive God's blessing. This emphasis upon ritual, compared with the apparently very different attitude of the earlier prophets,²³ has led some to rather severe opinions concerning the standard of religious duty which the author of Malachi lays down.²⁴ But it must be remembered that the earlier prophets did not condemn sacrifice as such, but as it had become corrupted and was not accompanied by the fundamental virtues of justice, mercy, and truth. Nor, on the other hand, ought the ritual which grew up with the services of the second temple to be confounded with the formalism of later Judaism. Had it not been for this very ritual, which insisted so much upon separateness from other nations, Judaism would have soon disintegrated. As it was, the ritual preserved, not only the Yahweh religion, but the nation itself. The Christ had yet to come. Some of the most devotional of the psalms, the very cream of the Psalter, were the product of this period. What better proof is desired of its spirituality? It is not far out of the way, then, to say that the author of Malachi showed true prophetic insight in thus emphasizing the need of the observance of the ritual.

²³Hos. 6:6; Isa. 1:10-17; Mic. 6:7, 8; Jer. 7:21, 22.

²⁴Cf. DUHM, *Theologie der Propheten*, p. 320.